

**READY FOR EASTER?!**  
**By Jack Heppner**  
**Presented at Gospel Fellowship Church, Steinbach**

**Texts:**

**Mt. 11:28-30**

**Mt. 16:13-28**

**Mt. 17:1-8**

**Mt. 17:22-23**

**Mt. 19:1-2**

**Mt. 20:17-19**

**Mt. 20:29-34**

**INTRODUCTION**

Do you find, as I do, that Easter kind of sneaks up on you? After the busy Christmas season we take a deep breath, brace ourselves against the long dark winter, and dream of spring. We get back into our *routines*, living from week to week - from day to day. And then suddenly it's at our doorstep – **Easter** has arrived! And then its over and spring is here! We get at spring house-cleaning, plant gardens, go on vacations, and trim down our church life, and sometimes even our spiritual disciplines, to a bare minimum. Once the weather turns colder we will again begin picking up our church and faith agendas, just in time to get things rolling for Christmas.

Have you ever wondered what a church in a tropical climate does? Or a church in a region where the weather remains ideal throughout the year, like it does in Quito, Ecuador – with a mean temperature of about 24 degrees Centigrade? If it would wait until the weather cools off before it got serious about really being the church, it would never get around to it. So what keeps such a church alive, and even vibrant throughout the year? What rhythms of church life do they experience? Don't worry, Quito weather will never come to Steinbach. Our seasons will continue to come and go as they have in the past. We will never have to worry about such a situation.

But I raise it to help us think about what it is that drives our church? What motivates us to keep our faith vibrant? What are the highlights of our Church Year that help us renew our faith and commitment to Christ? To an outsider from the South it might indeed appear to be the weather!

Now we shouldn't be too hard on ourselves. Our summers are short and we want to get as much out of them as possible. Like one friend who moved here from the South told me, "The one day we have summer here, I go barefoot!" Celebrate while you can, man! The day will soon come when you have to put your shoes back on! I am all for making the most of each of our four seasons! In fact it is our four distinct seasons that make Manitoba special in my mind.

But I am still troubled by the fact that every year Easter sneaks up on me from behind, at least so it seems. And before I can say "Jack Robinson" or "Jack Heppner," its over. I know this is true for many of you as well, because I have talked to you about it. So how did we get to this situation? And indeed, is there anything we can do about it?

## Why Does Easter Takes Us by Surprise?

To answer that question we need to take an honest look at what it is that punctuates our lives as contemporary Christians. In other words, what, in our calendar of events, do we really look forward to? In our response to that question, we must first of all admit that we live in a real world. And even though some of the values of society at large are not ours, our lives overlap all the time with people outside our church and even outside our faith. Indeed, to be in mission, we must remain in the world – of course without being totally absorbed by values that are alien to the core of Christian values.

People in this real world, like us, also need special times of the year to look forward to. The need to anticipate special times is built into human nature. I think that is one thing that distinguishes us from animals. There is more to life than eating, sleeping, working, mating and surviving as long as possible. Human beings thrive on anticipation. Some of us older folk have allowed our delight of anticipation to crust over. It takes less energy to just live from day to day! But it is very much alive in children. Fourteen more sleeps until Christmas! Wow, I can hardly wait! Is that one of the reasons Christ asks us to become like children? To recover the ability to to delight in anticipation?

But sometimes the punctuation marks on the societal calendar don't correspond with our faith calendars. Sometimes they even come into conflict. There was a time in the history of the church, when it played a more central role in the western world. The main stopping points – or the main celebration points in life – did in fact rotate around questions of faith. But as our society became increasingly more “secular” another competing calendar emerged, based largely on non-faith criteria.

And this new calendar works quite well for those outside of the church - it provides special occasions to anticipate and celebrate. And it might work well for people of faith too, if they would be willing to forego the high points of their church or faith calendar. But most of us don't like that idea too well. So we find ourselves in a situation in which we are forced to juggle two calendars - one based on secular values, another on faith values. Sometimes it seems that we almost need two lives to keep up with two calendars. But we only have one life and that is why we struggle to keep up with two calendars. I have a suspicion that that is why Easter sneaks up on me the way it does.

So what is the solution? Maybe we could turn the clock back and recover the dominant place the church once had in our culture so that we could dictate what goes **on** the calendar for all of society – and those events would be faith based. Then Christians would not have to keep juggling two calendars. Wouldn't life be that much easier for us all? Everyone would know, for example, what Sundays are for and we wouldn't have to choose between going to church or going shopping! There have indeed been many attempts during my lifetime to turn back the clock. The Moral Majority, (and I use that term in a broad sense to mean conservative Christian activists), tried their best to keep our country “Christian,” and to make laws that would require everybody to live by a church-based calendar!

The non-news is that these attempts have largely failed. And that leaves Christians in an apparent predicament. Which calendar shall we live by? Or at least how can we juggle the two calendars that call for our attention and obedience without going bonkers?

On the one hand the societal calendar is punctuated by long weekends, especially in the warmer months of the year, which in many cases have swallowed up whole, former religious festivals. When I asked my grade six class, years ago by now, just before Easter, why we were having a long-weekend

coming up about 90 percent had no idea – it was just a long weekend. Of course that wasn't in a school in the Bible Belt region of Southern Manitoba. And this notion is true for many as well for the Thanksgiving long weekend, even in the Bible Belt. It is a deserved break from work – a nice time to get away or to meet with family. So in the church we often focus on Thanksgiving the week before or after the long weekend.

And even Christmas has been hijacked and turned into a commercial festival of over-indulgence. It begins the day after Halloween and doesn't stop until well after the Boxing Day sales. And then there are a variety of special days that punctuate our societal calendars. Make your own list. I can't even think of them all. New Years Day, Valentines Day, Mother's Day, Father's Day, Children's Day, Family Day, Secretary's Day, Gay Pride Day, Halloween, Grey Cup Day, Stanley Cup Day, EMY Awards Day, Winter Olympics, Summer Olympics, hockey season, football season, baseball season, basketball season, curling season.... Most have redeemable value, I am sure.

And of course there is vacation time, during which faith issues seldom even hit the radar screen. My son tells me that at least a third of his church spill over into cottage country at the beginning of May. And he doesn't see them until sometime in September.

On the other hand, people of faith know, at least used to know, about a calendar rotating around the great celebrations of faith. But I am afraid much of this calendar is slipping into the mist of forgotten memories. Christians sometimes even look with disdain on “those conservatives” who let their faith-based holidays interfere with their work schedules. Get with it already! Go to work like the rest of us do! Stop being a pain to the system! Who needs two or three days off at Christmas and Easter? And for most the Day of Epiphany is gone. Pentecost often only gets passing mention – let alone a special celebration. Ascension day has descended into oblivion. As has All Saints Day. And the thought of spending a few weeks to get ready for Easter is lost in puddles of melting snow that drain down our sewers. Now even Good Friday is up for grabs. I suspect it is on its last leg. There is tremendous pressure to keep it from interfering with the world of business.

If this sounds like a lament, maybe it is. But I think it is more than that. It is somewhat of a cry of frustration - because, I at least, find myself caught between *two competing worldviews* and two distinct calendars that go with them.

However, I am encouraged when I remind myself that this is precisely the kind of world and experience that first century Christians faced – a world in which Christianity was not dominant. And those early Christians had to carve out for themselves a worldview, and a calendar of events and celebrations that had very little in common with the many festivals and circuses offered by the Roman world. *(In Ceasar's time there were 132 holidays each year. By the reign of Claudius the number had risen to 159, 93 of them devoted to gladiatorial games. By the third century there were 200 holidays of which 175 were devoted to games. By this time there were more holidays than working days in a year.)* Often for these early Christians carving out their primary calendar of events, was done at great cost. But they did it. *And so can we.* No, I must say it more emphatically, **So MUST we.**

We have to get used to the idea that we do not live in a Christian country. Just like first-century Christians, we are surrounded by a pluralistic society with many voices calling for our attention. So if

we don't define our priorities with at least one eye on faith, we will soon be swallowed up by the modern versions of the Roman circus days. In fact in many senses we already are swallowed up!

It is interesting to watch what is happening as our country becomes more and more multi-cultural and multi-faith based. New immigrants with different religions tend to bring their religious festivals with them and celebrate them with great fervor, even if they don't fit into the secular calendar. Take Ramadan, for example. Muslims in our country will go to great lengths to celebrate this holy month through fasting from dawn to dusk. They even go on television to explain why they are doing what they are doing to the world around them. I respect such primary commitment to one's faith.

But I see this in sharp contrast to traditional Christian festivals being swallowed up by our secular calendar. And Christians being afraid to make their Christian calendar primary over the secular one offered by society.

### **Another Reason Why Easter Sneaks Up**

The first reason, then in my view, why Easter sneaks up on me relates to the two competing calendars that we as Christians try to juggle. There isn't enough time or energy to fully live by both calendars, so we do a juggling act. And invariable something has to be cut. Unfortunately too often the cutting happens on our Christian calendars.

I think, however, that there is *another reason* why Easter sneaks up on me which has little to do with two competing calendars. And that reason is found in the history of the church. I say this not to criticize church leaders of the past or present, but rather to help me answer my question: "Why does Easter always sneak up on me?"

In the times before the Reformation - that is before the 1600s - all of life in so-called Christian lands rotated around the festivals of the church. Now it is fair to say that in many cases these festivals and rituals had ceased to be life-giving. They had moved over the line into the realm of *traditions to be kept*. So often they had lost their capacity to change lives and invigorate faith. We saw some of the leftovers of this phenomenon in Bolivia when we lived there in the 1970s, which was at the time largely traditional Catholic. It was clear in the minds of most people that during Lent one must confess sins, live holy lives, and go the extra mile to show your sincerity of faith.

The shadow side of Lent, as it had developed, was the advent of the Carnival - in North America, Mardi Gras. In a sense Carnival, in which drunkenness, immorality and every other sort of evil was tolerated, was rooted in a twisted version of Paul's idea that where sin abounds, even more grace abounds. So for a whole week before Lent, it was popularly held that God closed his eyes and let his children live it up. course they knew they were sinning, but they also knew that after carnival came Lent when they would all do penance and seek forgiveness for their sins. So by the time Easter came they had cleaned up their lives once more, so to say, and were ready for the great Easter celebraton. To me, this is clearly an abusive way of living by the church calendar.

When the Reformation happened in the early 16<sup>th</sup> century, zealous Christians were intent on rooting out traditions and practices that had distorted the gospel and given license to sin. Martin Luther, himself, maintained a close connection to the church year, as can be seen in any Lutheran Church today. But many reformers that came after him felt a need to distance themselves from such traditions.

They saw them as noisy gongs and clanging symbols, which is what they often were, at least from our vantage point. So in many of the renewal movements that followed the Lutheran Reformation, there was a strong move away from using symbols, processions and an adherence to old-church traditions and festivals. So whether it was the Anabaptist movement, or later the Pietists, and still later the Fundamentalists and revivalists, there was a move to rely more directly on the Holy Spirit to guide the church in how it planned its church life. Some still kept specific days as holy and special. Others moved in the direction of eliminating traditional festivals altogether.

I grew up in a church that had been born in the revival movement of the 1930s. It was the Rudnerweider Mennonite Church, now known as the EMMC. By the time I came along it had dropped many of the traditions of the older church it came from and prided itself in being Spirit-led. It was not uncommon for preachers to say that the Spirit had not given them anything to say until late Saturday night or while milking the cows on Sunday morning. One young firebrand I remember used to say that he made up his sermons while walking to the front of the church to begin speaking. Even as a young man, I sometimes wondered why the Spirit gave ministers topics to speak on totally unrelated to obvious church year highlights like Palm Sunday or Pentecost, for example.

It is true that there was a sense of immediacy and spontaneity about this approach to church life. You never knew what the Spirit would be up to next Sunday! But I also began to notice that the Spirit seemed to give very few messages to some preachers. No matter where they started out, they always ended up on their favorite topic. So I began to question whether this free-wheeling style of preaching had more to do with pet peeves of certain preachers than with the leading of the Holy Spirit. So, it seemed to me that while more traditional patterns had been left behind because of their flaws, now new and different flaws began appearing in this more free, Spirit-led pattern..

It did not take long to observe that this Spirit-led approach to church life did not always result in deepening faith and growing commitment. So right from the start, at least in the context of the EMMC story, leaders planned an annual “Revival” – a week of revival meetings where people would make things right with God and others. A special speaker, usually a dynamic one, was invited to challenge the church members to renewed commitments. And for many people, this was a highlight of the year. People in fact did confess their sins, make amends, get right with God, and change their direction of life. Raising your hand as a sign of recommitment – all eyes closed – or responding to an altar call openly, or kneeling at the front bench and praying with a counselor, were significant moments in the lives of many pilgrims. And how much joy there was the next night in giving a testimony of renewed faith and commitment!

I am old enough to remember such meetings. And I participated numerous times in these rituals of recommitment. I often found them to be stepping stones in my growing walk with God. And to testify publicly of my new commitment to Christ and the Church bonded me to his body in very tangible ways. Part of me says that I wish we could relive those times today. Partly because I see few opportunities today, other than a statement at baptism, where growing Christians are encouraged to openly recommit themselves to Christ and a life of discipleship.

As time went on, however, many of us started seeing the backside of scheduled revival meetings. Often it was the same people with the same problems at the altar every year. And a month after the revival everything had settled back to the way it was before the revival. And of course the “strong”

Christians didn't need to be revived, or at least make a public show of it – so it seemed. So they stayed glued to their seats while they watched the annual parade of the weaker ones among us make their annual trek to the altar. Sometimes there was emotional manipulation and sometimes the altar call was so confused that if you remained in your seat at all it would be obvious that you were not even a Christian. Once when this happened, I too left my seat but walked out instead of to the front – angry at the obvious manipulation and grandstanding I was observing.

I think, partly because of these abuses, revival meetings were gradually replaced with what we called “Deeper Life Meetings” because we saw a need for discipleship training. These too were popular for a number of decades and for many this annual week of special services provided a forum to recommit themselves to Christ and the church. And if revival or deeper life services didn't do it for you, there was always the annual Mission Conference, another week of special services, usually in fall, where our zeal for God could be nurtured and where calls were given to commit our lives to God's service – anywhere, anytime, anyhow! I remember walking to the front at such meetings and laying my life on the altar publicly. I would do *whatever* God called me to do, and I meant it!

But as time went on I noticed the increasing competition of the two calendars we spoke of earlier. Partly it resulted from our move to towns and cities where we held full-time jobs and a week of services simply became too taxing. But there were many other competing interests as well, like television, organized sports, music festivals and curling bonspiels, to name only a few. Some good some not so good.

**The bottom line was that we did not have time any longer for extended series of services which had once been church highlights where commitments and recommitments were openly made before God and others.**

### **So Where Do We Go From Here?**

For many years now I have been troubled by the fact that we have pretty much abandoned special times of commitment and recommitment in our church life. When I became Conference Minister in 1998 I remember saying to some of my friends that I was looking for a way to bring back a *forum* into the life of the church in which commitments and recommitments could be made openly. One couple from this church I shared this burden with rejoiced with me and said confidently that they were sure that I would find such a forum.

But it continued to elude me. I could understand why the old forums like week-long revival meetings, deeper-life services and mission conferences didn't work any more in our culture. It was too much to maintain two calendars full time. And besides, each of these series of services had their down-sides as well. Even the mission conferences where we focused on overseas missions sometimes became an excuse for **not** doing mission in our own back yards. One part of me continued to grieve the loss of these special times. Another part of me kept casting about for new models that could provide the contemporary church with special times and opportunities for commitments and recommitments.

As I was beginning to think about speaking two weeks before Easter, and fretting about how Easter always seems to sneak up on me, a light suddenly emerged from out of no where it seemed. Could the light be from God, I wondered? And I still wonder. But I want to share the vision that started coming

into focus as that light grew brighter. You will have to excuse my enthusiasm because my heart began to beat faster and I found myself thinking – Maybe, after all these years of searching, I have found an answer to my question! Maybe this is the way forward for me personally and for the church.

But could it just be a hair brained idea? I don't know, but I will share it with you for your consideration and discernment. If I am off track, consider the next few minutes as simply entertainment – although it might be low caliber entertainment.

### **The Recovery of Lent**

*I saw in my vision a recovery of Lent in the life of our church.* In essence I am asking, in the tug of war of the competing calendars we live by, whether we can allow the church calendar to become the primary one we live by, at least during the period of Lent. If we can pull that off, then we can fill up this season of Lent with many of the good things that we have lost with the older forums where we regularly renewed our commitments to God and the church.

As a matter of fact, the more I looked into this matter, the more I became aware that for those churches that do focus more sharply on Lent, this is precisely what it is all about – renewal and recommitment! Oh, we can quickly say, I know some people who go to churches like that and it hasn't helped them all that much. So knock it off. Been there, done that – and it doesn't work! Perhaps. But could they not say the same thing about some of our attempts relating to revival services, deeper life services and mission conferences? And besides, perhaps we can do better than simply adopting practices of Lent from other churches. Can we create our own new and dynamic opportunities to experience renewal in the season of Lent?

In the past decade or two we have already taken on the concept of Advent to prepare our hearts every year for the Christmas celebration. We light candles, begin singing Christmas carols, and hear sermons about the coming incarnation. We do a count-down to Christmas. Children like it. I think we all like it. The main complaint I hear however at Christmas is that we are so busy going to banquets that we don't have time to stop and savor advent for what it might be.

So is the time right for us to do something similar during the season of Lent? I think it is. I was surprised a few weeks ago to hear that someone in our church is fasting from chocolate for forty days before Easter. Someone else said she would be refraining from popcorn and pop for the month before Easter. What is going on here? Are these signs among us an indication of our thirst for times of recommitment? And if so, can we capitalize on them and encourage one another to make Lent a time of personal spiritual renewal? I raise this as a question.

I do not want to prescribe what we could be doing differently in Lent than we normally do. I do not see us getting into a prescribed pattern that we would repeat every year. Soon that would become tradition that might sound like a noisy gong or a clanging symbol. But if we would **proclaim** Lent as a time of personal and corporate renewal among us a number of things would happen.

First, we would begin expecting something to happen among us in the weeks leading up to Easter. Anticipation would be back! Individuals would find their own creative ways of focusing on their

spiritual journey. For some it might mean fasting of various sorts – from chocolate, popcorn, television, eating out, whatever... Maybe even going without food for a day, a week, or limiting yourself to one meal a day. Perhaps you would commit yourself to read an entire gospel during this time and follow Christ to the cross that way. Perhaps we could arrange for special times where we would share what God is doing in our lives during this time, and call for public commitments of renewal. Maybe every Sunday service during Lent could include a faith story of one of our members. Maybe all Sunday School classes would focus their dialogue in this direction during Lent. Perhaps our worship services in the six weeks of Lent could be focused more specifically on the life, and teachings of Jesus, which would lead naturally into the passion week. Small groups could meet together on Maundy Thursday, before Good Friday, to wash one another's feet, as Jesus washed the feet of his disciples that night, and share what Christ means to them. The format could be fluid and change from year to year, but always we would proclaim openly Lent to be a call for renewal, both personally and corporately.

### **Am I Ready for Easter?**

The texts that were read to us earlier chart the deliberate journey of Christ toward the cross. They invited us to take up our crosses and follow him. What does that mean to you? What does it mean to me?

I wonder what was going on in Jesus' mind when he stepped into the Jordan river, the last physical barrier between himself and Jerusalem where he would be crucified? What ever it was, it did not deter him. He stepped into the water – and moved toward his cross. And he had invited his followers each to take up their own crosses as well – to step into the waters of resistance themselves.

**Am I** willing to step into the water? Are **we** willing to step into the water – on the way to the cross – on the way to renewal?

For myself I have this year done some unusual things. Ruth and I went to see the movie *The Passion of the Christ*. It was a moving experience that I will never forget. Christ did indeed suffer and die a cruel death – for me! The flannelgraph Jesus of my childhood became real flesh and blood. He was bruised and broken beyond what I will ever face, I am sure. I also wrote a letter to a friend with whom relationships had stagnated and largely broken down, releasing him to God. Giving him my blessing. And committing myself to focus on dealing with my own sins instead of pointing them out in others. Ruth and I are reading through the Gospel of Luke together during this time of Lent in Eugene Peterson's version. And we are praying that as we do so we will take on more of the character of Christ. I am not sure what else I will yet do.

But one thing I do know – I hunger and thirst for renewal, and I long to find it in the company of others also finding it. Jesus once said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they shall be filled!”

I am willing to step into the water? Would you like to come with me?

(Followed by the sound track of “Step into the Water.”)

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